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Sailing in Harm's Way

Action and tension behind the scenes during "Operation Prairie Fire"

"They also serve who only stand and wait." That was what White House Chief of Staff Donald Regan recalls thinking early Monday morning after he heard that Libya had fired two errant SA-5 missiles at U.S. planes flying off the Libyan coast. For 36 hours, Regan and other top aides had been waiting for news from the Gulf of Sidra, where three U.S. carrier groups were skirting Muammar Gaddafi's "line of death." Vice Admiral Frank Kelso, commander of the Sixth Fleet, had orders to fire if fired upon, but he had yet to make his move. "It was frustrating," Regan says. "Like watching a baseball game through a knothole. We could technically see the action, but we couldn't get an idea of the overall picture."

Regan's boss, however, showed no sign of anxiety. At 9:30 on Monday, Ronald Reagan received his regular morning briefing in the Oval Office from his taciturn National Security Adviser, Vice Admiral John Poindexter. The President's jaw clenched when Poindexter mentioned the missiles, but unlike most of the others present, he was content to wait. "He didn't pound the table or try to micromanage the situation," said one participant. "He had in mind what happened when they tried to run the Iranian hostage rescue operation from 8,000 miles away." The President, referring to Kelso, said only this: "The man knows what he's doing. Let's let him do the job."

Ever since Reagan took office in 1981, Gaddafi has been the Administration's archfiend, an erratic adversary whose sinister hand was perceived behind a tangle of bloody atrocities. As early as 1981, the CIA accused Libya of being the most prominent sponsor of international terrorism, and Reagan talked ominously about Libyan hit squads sent out to assassinate U.S. officials. That same year, F-14 fighter jets shot down two Soviet-built Libyan fighters after a sudden dogfight over the Gulf of Sidra. Last June, when TWA Flight 847 was hijacked and 39 Americans were held hostage, the Administration saw Gaddafi's shadow and decided that he had to be taught a lesson.

At a secret meeting in July, then National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane won agreement that diplomatic and economic pressures had not put a crimp in Gaddafi's style and that more potent measures were needed. Even Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, who has a deep reluctance to take military actions unless the results are quick and clean, for once was in harmony with Secretary of State George Shultz, who has consistently advocated retribution against Gaddafi and anyone else connected with terrorist acts.

"We wrote many contingency plans," a top CIA officer told TIME last week. Among them: a joint U.S.-Egyptian operation designed to topple Gaddafi, a plan to work with the French that included offensive actions from both the Mediterranean and Chad, and covert action involving other North African governments. McFarlane dispatched Poindexter, then his deputy, to confer with Egypt and other allies in the Middle East and Europe. "We even approached Israel," the intelligence official notes. But the response was discouraging; intelligence reports showed little chance of fomenting a coup within Libya, and none of the ideas jelled. "We learned the hard way," says the CIA man, "that if we want to settle the account with Gaddafi we will have to do it ourselves."

Two events accelerated U.S. planning: Libya's installation of Soviet-made SA-5 missiles at Surt and the horrifying terrorist massacres at the Rome and Vienna airports in December. After the Administration found indirect links between Libya and the airport actions, it announced economic sanctions against Libya and ordered Americans there to leave at once. While U.S. allies waffled on sanctions, behind-the-scenes planning for a more muscular response went into high gear.

The series of options called for unilateral U.S. operations to begin at the end of January. Two aircraft-carrier battle groups would be stationed north of the Gulf of Sidra, and aircraft and ships would proceed into the "death zone" south of the 32nd parallel that Gaddafi claims, in defiance of international law, as the limit of Libya's territorial waters. The operation, however, was called off at the last minute, when senior naval officers reviewed the plan and decided that a third aircraft carrier was needed to provide the optimum margin of safety.

A revised plan involving three carrier

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groups, dubbed Operation Prairie Fire, was presented to Reagan at a National Security Council session on March 14. The reasons for challenging Gaddafi in the gulf were clear: virtually no country recognized his claim to sovereignty over water extending 120 miles from the Libyan coast, and enforcing the principle of freedom of the seas would provide a pretext for sending him a message that his free ride was over. No one doubted that the dictator would take the bait.

PHOTOGRAPH FOR TIME BY DIANA WALKER

Wednesday morning: Regan, Reagan, Bush and Poindexter

At the meeting, Admiral William Crowe, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, spelled out the proposed rules of engagement. U.S. planes would probe below the "line of death." If Libyan planes were judged to be approaching in a hostile manner, they would be downed. No Libyan warships would be allowed within range. If missiles from Surt were fired, the U.S. would disable the site. The President sounded a cautionary note. "Could this lead us into trouble?" he asked. "Could we end up with a less palatable situation than we have now?" He was assured that the possibility of Soviet intervention was near zero. At the end of the hour-long meeting, the President nodded his approval. "There was no dissent," said one source. "The President said, 'All right, let's do it.' "

After the meeting, Weinberger met secretly in London with Sixth Fleet Commander Kelso to review the final plans and, said one source, "spell out in detail exactly what the President had in mind." Kelso, a square-jawed Annapolis graduate who trained as a nuclear engineer and is likely to become the next Chief of Naval Operations, would be commanding the armada's 45 ships and more than 200 planes. On Friday, March 21, the Navy publicly announced plans to begin operations the next evening. From then on it was Kelso's show. Only in the event of American casualties would he be required to check back with Washington before ordering a counterattack.

As the operation was scheduled to begin, almost the entire senior cast of Administration officials, including the President, was attending the white-tie Gridiron Club dinner, the capital press corps's annual rite of songs and sketches for Washington insiders. At one side of the head table sat Weinberger, Crowe, Poindexter and White House Spokesman Larry Speakes, separated by journalists. Noted Robert Sims, Weinberger's press aide: "We were scared to death of all those beepers going off." None of them did. Poindexter slipped out at one point to phone the situation room. He returned to tell his co-conspirators, "Everything's quiet. They're postponing due to bad weather."

By Sunday afternoon the three U.S. carriers—the *America*, the *Saratoga* and the *Coral Sea*—were stationed in a row just north of the mouth of the gulf. That night U.S. planes began to dart across the "line of death." At 1 p.m. the next day, a three-ship detachment took up Gaddafi's dare by steaming into the disputed gulf. It included a destroyer, a guided-missile cruiser and the *Ticonderoga*, which is equipped with the Pentagon's prized Aegis radar and command system, which can coordinate air defense for an entire battle fleet. In the air were as many as 100 planes arranged in concentric circles at various altitudes. "Rings of steel," one Pentagon official called them. At the acme were E-2C Hawkeye area-surveillance planes; just below were EA-6B Prowlers, designed to detect and then scatter enemy radar and radio. Underwater were *Los Angeles*–class attack submarines. No sign of anything from Gaddafi.

When Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger arrived at his Pentagon office at 7 a.m. on Monday, it was already 2 p.m. in the Gulf of Sidra, and the exercise had been under way for almost 15 hours. "Nothing had happened, and we wondered why," said one Weinberger aide. "We asked ourselves, Was Gaddafi going to be reasonable?" But as Weinberger prepared to begin his daily 8:30 staff meeting, Admiral Crowe called from the National Command Center at the Pentagon. Gaddafi, as some suspected and even hoped, had not been reasonable. The Libyans had fired SA-5 missiles at two reconnaissance planes. The missiles, probably spooked by the jamming equipment of the EA-6B Prowlers, spun off course and plunged into the Mediterranean. Crowe also notified Poindexter, who relayed the information to the White House.

Following the firing of the missiles, Kelso received a teletype from the commander in chief of the Libyan air force. It read: "Unless the aggressive acts are stopped against Libya we are about to destroy the carriers Stop In doing that we will have the political and military support of the world states Stop Maintain in peace you will leave in peace Stop Best regards." Kelso planned to return his regards, but not over a teletype.

Nor did Kelso hurry. Later that afternoon two Libyan MiG-25s ventured out beyond the twelve-mile limit and then turned tail of their own accord. The Libyans fired another SA-5 missile that twisted off target. By 6:15 that evening, the Pentagon estimates, the Libyans had launched six missiles.

Still no U.S. response. At the White House and Pentagon, officials wondered what Kelso was waiting for. Poindexter, however, was calm. He puffed away at his pipe, hardly saying a word. "Poindexter did not call the fleet commander even once during the entire crisis," said one White House staffer. "That would only have increased the burden and would have caused more tension." Poindexter speculated that Kelso would launch his counterattack at

FIGARO, GAMMA LIAISON

All quiet: Gaddafi captured in a rare moment of introspection

On a high, seemingly pumped up by the battle with the U.S.

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night. At the White House, Don Regan was edgy. He called Weinberger and Crowe to come over and explain the delay. Their response was the same as Poindexter's: wait until dark.

When darkness came, the sea was roiled by 15-ft. swells. Kelso had indeed postponed any action because, as one officer put it, "the Libyans don't fly at night." At 9:26 p.m., two A-6 Intruders roared from the deck of the *America*. They flew toward a Libyan attack boat that was moving toward the U.S. armada. When the vessel got within 40 miles of U.S. ships, the A-6 jets let fly with Harpoon missiles that skimmed along the sea and rammed into the Libyan boat, setting it ablaze.

PETER JORDAN

An F-14 roars off the deck of the *Saratoga*

Less than an hour later, two A-7 attack planes took off from the *Saratoga* after Navy sensors detected radar emissions from the missile site at Surt. They flew to about 40 miles from the base and released their high-speed anti-radiation missiles (HARM). The missiles home in on radar waves and are designed to destroy the transmitter, not the missiles or launchers themselves. "We shot out the tires," said one Pentagon official. "We didn't need to fire a pistol through the windshield to take out the driver."

When Poindexter went in to tell the President about the U.S.'s striking back, Reagan immediately responded with a question: "Any casualties?" No, said Poindexter. The President clenched his fist and shook it. "Good. Good." The tension had lifted. The White House summoned congressional leaders for a briefing, and Poindexter informed Tip O'Neill, Strom Thurmond, Robert Byrd and Bob Michel about U.S. actions. O'Neill emerged from the meeting and, choosing his words carefully, declared that "the Administration's handling of this matter is on the right course."

At 5 p.m., Larry Speakes began a press briefing that was carried live by all the networks. When he finished describing the Libyan and American actions, Speakes added, "We reserve the right to take additional measures as events warrant." The first question was, "Is this war?" Speakes' tight-lipped answer did not exactly defuse the query. "I can't characterize it as war," he said. When Speakes' press conference ended, Weinberger began one of his own at the Pentagon, in which he reported an encounter with a second Libyan boat.

Two A-6 bombers flying over the gulf had spotted a Soviet-built Nanuchka-missile Corvette sailing west out of the Libyan port of Benghazi. When the ship passed the twelve-mile limit, the A-6s attacked. Two hours later, at 1:15 a.m. Libyan time, the Aegis system aboard the *Yorktown* spotted a French-built Combattante patrol boat cruising the darkened waters of the gulf north of the "line of death." As the ship neared the American fleet, it speeded up. Kelso ordered the firing of two Harpoon missiles. "They saw a flash," said one official, "but we really aren't sure what we hit." The Navy S-3 Viking aircraft sent to investigate found nothing. It has been suggested that the Libyans may have fooled the U.S. by creating an electronic mirage, and that there had actually been no boat at all.

About four hours after the first strike on the Surt missile base, American sensors again detected radar from the site scanning the gulf. Weinberger later said he "would assume" that Soviet technicians helped the Libyans repair the base. American planes launched two more HARM missiles, and again the radar went dead. The final American strike occurred later that morning: a pair of fighter jets hit at least one Libyan vessel near Benghazi.

Aboard the Sixth Fleet, the sailors and flyers were experiencing an adrenaline rush. Said one pilot: "Finally you're doing what you've been trained to do." The Navy had learned something: how its men and its hardware functioned in battle. Kelso, for one, was pleased with both. Later Reagan telephoned his congratulations: "You have sent a message to the whole world that the United States has the will and, through you, the ability to defend the free world's interests." Yet some felt sympathy mixed with pride. Noted one airman: "We recognize that they are human beings, and we deeply regret that they had to be killed."

Gaddafi, who had been conspicuous by his public absence, emerged to inaugurate an international trade fair on Tuesday and stroll through a cheering, worshipful claque. The official government line was that three U.S. planes had been downed and there were no Libyan casualties. After the battle, Libyan radio exhorted its audience: "O, heroes of our Arab nation, let your missiles and suicide cells pursue American terrorist embassies and interests wherever they may be!" Gaddafi, seemingly pumped up by the battle, was still on a high Friday, when he appeared on the balcony of his well-protected bunker in Tripoli. "We will impose our sovereignty on the Gulf of Sidra with our blood!" he proclaimed, declaring that he had vanquished the Sixth Fleet.

Reagan announced the end of the exercises on Thursday when he stepped from Air Force One in New Orleans for a political speech. In all, the U.S. had sunk at least two vessels and temporarily shut

Not just an idle threat: a battery of Soviet-made SA-2 missiles with radar on the Libyan coast

Gaddafi's "line of death" across the mouth of the gulf was a fiction backed up by a mirage of power.

down a missile base. The Libyans had not touched the U.S. fleet. The number of Libyan casualties was not known. Weinberger summed things up: "It was in every way a successful operation."

One of the major risks had been the possibility of killing Soviet personnel, who were known to be present at Surt. But the U.S. had quietly informed Moscow of its intentions in advance. Says one Navy source, referring to the placement of Gaddafi's "line of death": "We told the Soviets explicitly what we intended to do, including transiting below the 32nd parallel. They didn't have to read between the lines." When the attacks were launched, the Soviets apparently were not around. "Maybe they were taking a coffee break," said one official wryly. The Soviets had one communication ship anchored at Surt and kept it lit up like a country carnival so that the U.S. fleet would know not to shoot it. But in the event of a more strenuous fight, the U.S. had made an explicit decision not to be deterred by the risks of Soviet casualties. Said a U.S. official: "This wasn't our intent, but if it happened, that's too bad."

The Administration suspected that the operation diminished the Soviets' prestige, both by revealing the inferiority of the weapons they had supplied to Libya and by exposing their reluctance to do anything other than light up their ship and head for safety when fighting broke out. But General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev did seek to score some propaganda points. In a speech on Wednesday, the Soviet leader denounced the "imperial, bandit face" of U.S. policy, and then offered to withdraw Soviet naval forces from the Mediterranean if the U.S. did likewise. The ploy was scarcely plausible. The American commitment to protect Western interests in the Mediterranean is considered vital and stretches back 40 years. Gorbachev's offer, said one official, was in effect asking the U.S. to sacrifice a knight for a pawn. On Saturday, Gorbachev went still further by calling for an early summit with Reagan in Europe to discuss his proposed ban on testing nuclear weapons. But Donald Regan pointed out that the Soviet leader had already agreed to a summit in a different locale. "The United States," said Regan. "That's where he was invited."

Meanwhile, George Shultz, who was in the midst of a European trip in search of assurances that U.S. bases would remain in Greece and Turkey, held a press conference in Ankara at which his usually stony face fairly beamed with satisfaction. He defended the exercise off Libya as a simple assertion of "traditional maritime rights," but later described the action as "blowing the whistle" on Gaddafi. Shultz was one of the first U.S. officials affected by a stepped-up alert against potential Libyan terrorist reprisals. When he left Ankara for Athens, his Boeing 707 was escorted by a team of Turkish, Greek and U.S. jets.

With the exception of Jordan and Egypt, which remained circumspect, most Arab nations lambasted the U.S. for its arrogance and aggression. As usual, even those who privately abhor Gaddafi linked arms in Arab solidarity rather than side with the U.S. That reflex worries Republican Charles Mathias, a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. "A lot of their leaders don't like Gaddafi any more than we do," he says. "But we put them into the position of having to choose between him and us." Although Washington hoped the operation would diminish the Libyan's prestige, it seemed more likely to reinforce his self-proclaimed image as a David against Goliath. Notes William Quandt, Middle Eastern specialist at the Brookings Institution: "I think we have helped to prop up Gaddafi internally, made it harder for his opposition to get a hand on him."

The battle of Sidra left a few smoking Libyan boats and one large question mark: Will America's slap at Gaddafi deter or stimulate further terrorism? The Administration believes that its response will induce Gaddafi to be cautious. "If people know they are likely to get clobbered if they act up, they are likely to think twice about it," said Brent Scowcroft, National Security Adviser under Gerald Ford. But Gaddafi was hardly clobbered this time around. He has vowed, and there is no reason to disbelieve him, that he will continue his war against the U.S. in an arena in which the Sixth Fleet cannot sail—that of international terror. Indeed, according to intelligence officials, his involvement with terrorism is at an all-time high.

In New Orleans, Reagan pledged that the U.S. "would hold Mr. Gaddafi responsible for his actions." The Sidra skirmish showed that the U.S. would indeed strike back in a carefully calibrated way when given a clean and easy target. But such occasional shootouts, when accompanied by alarmist rhetoric but no sustained diplomatic initiatives, in the Middle East or elsewhere, are hardly a foundation for an effective policy, especially against terrorism. Nor does the battle of Sidra provide much of a guide for retaliation when the source of the threat is not as easy to identify as a speeding patrol boat nor as simple to locate as a beaming radar installation. —*By Richard Stengel. Reported by David Beckwith and Bruce van Voorst/Washington and John Borrell/Tripoli*